

# Not Strangers but Pilgrims

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*A more ambitious ecumenical scheme has never been seen in Great Britain than the Swanwick Inter-Church Process. The BRITISH EVANGELICAL COUNCIL is so concerned about the implications it has for evangelicals that they have published a booklet entitled **HOLDING HANDS IN THE DARK** showing the background to the Process, analysing its essential nature and discussing its probable outcome. It is no exaggeration to say that it is required reading for leaders of those evangelical churches whose denominations are part of the Process. It will also be valuable to independent churches in showing their members why they believe they must stand aside from this latest ecumenical disaster.*

*We publish here the substance of the last section of the booklet, indicating the likely consequences we expect if the Swanwick proposals are implemented. The booklet costs 75 pence post free and can be obtained from the BEC office.*

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Thirty-two candles were lit and placed in a tray of earth. They burned side by side in St Peter's Church, Eaton Square in London on the evening of the 8th November 1985 symbolising the undertaking given by thirty-two churches to work side by side in prayer, study and discussion in the new initiative of the Inter-Church Process. In September 1987 the Process held a Conference at Swanwick and those participating issued a significant Declaration. They also laid out the ground plans for sweeping changes in the pattern of ecumenical relationships in Great Britain. It is clear that **these will affect every church in the land** and the whole climate of Christian life will be involved.

We recognise that some modifications may well be made to the present proposals before their implementation in September 1990. It is **now**, however, that the discussion is taking place and churches must consider, among other factors, the effects Swanwick is likely to have. These are the consequences we foresee:

## **1. Unity will be given precedence over truth**

Although lip-service is given to the place of Scripture, the principle of *unity in truth* is being displaced by *unity before truth*. This is a reversal of the Biblical order. "The oft-quoted prayer of our Lord, 'that they all may be one' (John 17:21), is preceded by the equally important proviso: 'Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth' (John 17:17). Truth is not a goal to be reached. It is a ground on which to stand from the outset" (Dr A Skevington Wood, EV, vol 11, no 2, p 17). By the way in which some seem to view the Swanwick Process its effect will amount to *unity instead of truth*. The principle of Liberation Theology, that truth is discovered through action, leads to *new*

*truth* for today which is at loggerheads with the truth of yesterday. Without doubt, ecumenicalism is the new orthodoxy and the new heretics are those who do not espouse it.

## **2. Absolutism in doctrine will be further eroded**

The late Francis Schaeffer amply demonstrated the growth of relativism in philosophical thought in the twentieth century and how it has made massive inroads into theology. Ecumenical thinking is a product of this trend and every new scheme re-inforces it. An American liberal, Bishop J S Spong of Newark, has written:

“If Christian unity is to be achieved, Christian pluralism will have to be affirmed and the relativity of all Christian truth will have to be established. This reality makes us aware that every narrow definition of Christian doctrinal certainty will finally have to be abandoned; every claim by any branch of the Christian church to be the true church or the only church will ultimately have to be sacrificed; every doctrine of infallibility — whether of the papacy, or of the Scriptures, or of any sacred tradition, or of any individual experience — will inevitably have to be forgotten” (Christian Century, June 8-15, 1983).

Paul Schrotenboer quoted Spong in order to warn evangelicals against advocating that sort of dialogue and entering the forum where it takes place (ERT, vol 12, no 3, p 216).

## **3. Acceptance of the Roman Catholic Church will grow**

With some misgivings the RC hierarchy sees Swanwick as the next step in their seeking acceptance and, some would say, ultimate supremacy in the religious life of this nation. They would not do so unless they believed they could influence the Proposals to further their own goals. Any reluctance, however, is all on the RC side; no hesitation is expressed among the other Swanwick participants. Now there is a level at which all Christians are to “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Rom 15:7). To accept a converted Roman Catholic as a brother in Christ before he sees that he must leave the religious system in which he was brought up is a duty (Acts 18:26). But to accept the Roman Catholic Church with its unreformed doctrines of the Mass, its Mariolatry and its complex of indulgences, penances and purgatory is something else. To accept such a Church as a valid Christian church with which we could even contemplate co-operation and unity in mission is an insult to the glory of the Head of the Church. And yet that is precisely what evangelical churches are being asked to do as a pre-condition of taking part in the Swanwick Process.

## **4. The gap between national and local ecumenism will widen**

As we have seen, there is a deliberate shift towards local activities. This is to opt for the sprinters rather than those at the back of the field. It is in line with the contemporary view that we *do theology* at the coal face rather than *write theology* in the academic study. “Lent ’86 was an attempt to listen to what the

Holy Spirit was saying to and through the churches and that is a theological statement. The responses from those who participated are also theological statements” (VIEWS p 58). This can amount to a further challenge to the principle of authority in the church and that would not be an unmixed blessing. Where there is a wide gap between what ought to be and what is then the authority of the gospel itself is in danger of being discredited. How will the world take seriously a church which does not take itself seriously?

## **5. Pressure to involve local churches will increase**

The pressure is already there. For churches in denominational structures their representatives may make the decision for them and the local congregations will be expected to fall into line. There were also people at Swanwick from groups which have no authority over their associated congregations. (This has led to some misunderstanding, for example, over the commitment of the Christian Brethren to the Process. The submission in their name has the authority only of the man who wrote it, as his own reference to “unfederated autonomous local congregations” indicates! REFLECTIONS, p 18-21). Such local churches will now receive invitations to meet representatives of other Christian groups in their locality to discuss a wide variety of activities which, the Press will be told, “all the churches support”. This would be serious enough if it led to churches going against their better judgment merely because of peer group pressure. What is even more serious is that the Bible views false teaching about the gospel not merely as unfortunate but as satanic (Mt 16:23; 2 Cor 11:13-14; Rev 2:24 etc). The choice between condoning such spurious gospels and opposing them for Christ’s sake will become even more painful as grass-roots ecumenicalism takes a firmer hold.

## **6. Evangelical relationships will be strained even further**

Every man must do what his own conscience dictates. Evangelical Christians and evangelical churches are not all agreed about ecumenicity and there are strong advocates of Swanwick who are evangelicals. If we were to accept that the unity of all evangelicals need only be expressed at para-church level in conventions and co-operative evangelism the strain would not be so great. There are those, however, who believe that evangelical churches *as churches* should be witnessing to the unity of the genuine body of Christ for the gospel’s sake. The burden of the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his 1966 address to the National Evangelical Assembly was not the issue of the church but the issue of the gospel. How can we convince the unbeliever that **the doctrine which most matters to us is the gospel** if our churches are more closely linked with those who deny it than with those who affirm it? In an irenic and constructive book a Baptist minister has recently expressed his disquiet over the strains he feels at this level.

“The seeking after visible unity with the church of Rome with which some Anglican Evangelicals are engaged seems to us to be either a dangerous pipe-dream or a denial of the truth. But while this apparently vain search goes on, that cross-fertilisation between biblical Christians in the established church and the free churches has been hindered and is *in*

*danger of lasting damage*” (AMESS, p 98, our italics).

The further the Swanwick pilgrimage proceeds the greater that danger will be.

## **7. Millions of strangers to God will be deluded that they are pilgrims**

This is **the most serious objection of all** to the Inter-Church Process entitled “Not Strangers but Pilgrims”. To encourage someone to believe that they are a pilgrim bound for heaven whilst they remain a stranger to God and his saving grace is a fearful responsibility. Not only the title but the whole ethos of the Process is indiscriminate and presumptuous. This is not only unwise, it furthers the most fatal of delusions. John Bunyan anticipated this scenario in the closing paragraph of **PILGRIM’S PROGRESS**. Vain-hope, the ferry man, helps Ignorant across the river only to see him bound hand and foot and consigned to outer darkness. Bunyan’s comment must serve as a grave warning to all who offer false encouragement to any church-goers in our nation who remain unconverted, “Then I saw there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven as well as from the City of Destruction.”

## **Conclusion**

We make no apology for the fact that our appraisal of the Swanwick Process amounts to a critique. We cannot in all conscience commend what is built upon such unsound foundations. Our conclusion, however, is not negative.

**Swanwick should be a stimulus** to those evangelicals who are better grounded to raise a better house. There is such a thing as genuine evangelical ecumenicity. To question Swanwick is not to affirm isolationism. The Bible does envisage a visible expression of unity between gospel churches. As the people of God grow in holiness they will grow in love for one another and manifest that love in meaningful, relevant care for one another. It is a spiritual work, not achieved by church politics or carnal methods. The Holy Spirit does, however, use means to achieve his purposes. **The British Evangelical Council** is a body seeking to express and further this positive goal of evangelical church unity. If there was need for its testimony when it was founded over thirty-five years ago, then Britain after Swanwick is going to need it even more.

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## **References**

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